"White and Nerdy":

Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype

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Previous research on nerds has analyzed the relationship of this stereotypical identity to issues of race, gender, and computer expertise. For instance, in a previous article, I argue that narratives such as that presented in the popular movie, *Revenge of the Nerds,* depict the incorporation of the previously marginalized nerd identity into closer alliance with hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating the increasing legitimacy of expertise in computers as a form of masculine prowess. However, I also suggest that "the continued negativity of the nerd stereotype reveals a persistent uneasiness with computer use and computer users." (280) In a similar analysis, Ron Eglash analyzes images of nerds as white and male by default, yet "hardly a portrait of white male superiority" (50). He explores possibilities for reversal, analyzing images of black nerds in popular culture, and attempts by black and women to subvert the nerd stereotype. However, ultimately he notes that "*nerd* is still used in the pejorative sense; its routes to science and technology access are still guarded by the unmarked signifiers of whiteness and male gender" (60).

Both of these articles point to contradictions in nerd identity that allow it to "both maintain normative boundaries of power and offer sites for intervention" (Eglash 49). It is logical to expect that the tension inherent in those contradictions would resolve over time, as computers become more ubiquitous in society. We've been through several cycles of developments in computer- and internet-related technologies, including the phenomenal wave of internet start-ups in the 1990s (just prior to my article) and the subsequent "dot-com bust" of 2000 (just prior to Eglash's). In the U.S., information technologies are increasingly part of most people's lives. As the household

presence of computers becomes no more extraordinary than that of other consumer electronics such as televisions and microwave ovens, one might expect that the nerd stereotype would fade from view, an anachronism from an earlier age, reflecting now-defunct uneasiness with the then-new computer technologies.

Yet images of and references to nerds are more prevalent now than ever before. Many such images and references provide ironic reconfigurings of nerd identity. But even the most playful of such reconfigurings fail to dispel the original negative tone of the stereotype. Most depictions continue to reinscribe the nerd as marginalized and undesirable, even as they exempt certain nerdy types from the full sting of the slur. Furthermore, gatekeeper functions of the nerd stereotype that both I and Eglash identified earlier still operate. While consumer computer use continues to grow, computer professions, especially those involving programming, remain dominated by white (and Asian) men. In fact, earlier gains by women in computer education and employment are reversing.[1]

Nerds are more in the public eye now than ever before, as indicated, for instance, by the steadily increasing use of the term nerd in newspaper articles.[2] In addition, several notable events in nerd history occurred in 2006, including an attempted but abandoned remake of the original 1984 *Revenge of the Nerds*, an immensely popular music video by noted song parodist Weird Al Yankovic entitled *White and Nerdy*, and the rise of "nerdcore," a genre of hip hop music. References to nerds now routinely occur in advertisements, especially for computer-related services.

In the following I take a closer look at three examples of discourses about nerds: (1) Geek Squad's website, (2) Yankovic's *White and Nerdy* video, and (3) various websites and videos related to Nerdcore. These examples provide information on how images of nerds operate in

today's culture, and the implications of this for our use of computers, our attitudes towards information technology, and the lingering power issues underlying these uses and attitudes. Nerds, Distilled and Contested

"We've spent more time with Windows Vista™ than is socially acceptable"

Prominent quote on Geek Squad's homepage (March 14, 2007)

The ubiquitousness of the nerd stereotype has enabled it to be distilled to just a few essential elements which then conjure up the whole. In images of nerds, those elements constitute two essential items: the short-sleeved white dress shirt worn with a tie. Thick-rimmed glasses and pocket protectors full of pens are optional. This minimal requirement is exemplified by the "agents" of Geek Squad, the computer service and support company started in 1994 and acquired in 2002 by the electronics chain Best Buy.[3] Geek Squad's website even includes a link describing the "uniform," about which they say "you pretty much have to have no ego to dress this way. We only feel cool in groups." Both male and female employees wear white short-sleeved shirts and black ties, and images in print and television advertising for Geek Squad always include this uniform.

Variations on the white shirt and black tie can still be read as conforming to the general formula if presented in the right context. For instance, MC Frontalot – who coined the term "nerdcore" (referring to a nerd subgenre of hip hop), appears in more colorful short-sleeved dress shirts and ties, along with large thick-rimmed glasses. Because his mode of dress is so out of keeping with other hip hop fashion, and because the lyrics of nerdcore songs refer to nerd interests such as computers, science fiction, and fantasy, his look still effectively conveys the stereotype.

Geek Squad's look alludes to cultural icons other than nerds. Their website references "mormons and g-men" as inspirations for their sartorial style. Their promotional literature draws

as much on cultural images of law enforcement (especially federal law enforcement) as it does on images of nerds. Geek Squad actually juxtaposes these two themes in interesting ways. A closer analysis of their website illuminates the dangers of embracing a nerd identity and the steps necessary to guard against those dangers.

Geek Squad seeks to sell computer support services to the general public. The nerd identity serves their purposes to the extent that this is an identity that people associate with computer expertise. However, nerds stereotypically have low social skills, which would not be an asset in a service-oriented occupation. Further, as many Hollywood filmmakers have found, it is difficult to make computer security or repair seem particularly interesting or valiant. Many people also fear that young computer experts may be hackers, yet young computer users are those most likely to be hired in relatively low-paying service jobs such as those offered by Geek Squad. The addition of references to law enforcement in Geek Squad's literature turns these low-level service-and-repair employees into secret agent superheroes, looking out for the welfare of computer users everywhere.

The website in fact includes more cultural material – explaining and presenting Geek Squad's image and ethos – than actual useful information about services offered. In addition to numerous joking references to nerds, and several pop-ups explaining such cultural aspects as the uniform and the cars agents drive, the U.S. Geek Squad site includes 11 short documentary videos, and 8 television spots (apparently originally aired on the TNN network). This cultural material includes a great deal of contradictory information about who and what a Geek Squad agent is. The key contradictions concern nerdiness vs. coolness and the issue of agent diversity.

To counter the negative effects of adopting a nerd identity, Geek Squad does considerable work to show how "cool" their agents are. Following the "about Geek Squad" link on their

homepage leads to links to several pages about agents. One, "Behind the Badge," presents eleven short documentary-style videos purporting to be views of actual agents in the field. As might be expected, the videos show agents being helpful, courteous, and professional. But they also show agents talking about their lives and what they like about the job. One agent in Southern California, featured in several of the videos, talks about his band and his competitive surfing days. The video "Surf" shows this agent surfing, still in his Geek Squad white-shirt-and-black-tie uniform! On another page, a fancy flash pop-up about the Geekmobile (a Volkswagon Beetle with distinctive black and white paint and orange logos) demonstrates fictional equipment in a manner inspired by James Bond-type spy films. There's even an image of an invisible Geekmobile to "allow agents to sneak up on viruses undetected." These videos and pop-ups counter the uncool image of nerds by connecting Geek Squad agents to cooler and more masculine identities such as surfers and spies.

"Agents Up Close," elsewhere on the Geek Squad website, provides close-ups and tongue-in-cheek explanations about each piece of the agents' uniform. While the equipment pop-up emphasized the super-cool law-enforcement identity, the uniform pop-up consists mostly of jokes about the nerd identity. It includes statements such as "rarely will you see this many white socks in one place" accompanied by an image of many pairs of feet clad in black pants, black shoes, and white socks. Similar jokes appear on other parts of the website. Under "Common Questions," one statement answers the question "What forms of payment does Geek Squad take?" with the usual credit cards, cash, etc., and then states parenthetically that "[w]hile it has no monetary value, we also welcome dating advice." This plays off the stereotype that nerds lack social skills and knowledge about romance. Geek Squad pages thus juxtapose claims for coolness with jokes about their anti-cool nerdy status.

One of the links on the uniform pop-up reads "Skirt and Leggings." Text accompanying

the image of a woman in a medium-length skirt shown from belt to just below the hem reads "contrary to popular belief there are female agents in the Geek Squad ranks." Geek Squad thus acknowledges that nerds are stereotypically male. However, in the more official portions of its website, Geek Squad makes attempts to represents its workforce as more diverse. Their U.S. homepage shows two male agents, one white and one black. The black agent stands behind the white agent and is partially obscured. The black agent also wears glasses, providing a further signifier of nerd identity beyond the white-shirt-and-tie to counter the expectation that nerds are not black. The U.K. homepage (uk.geeksquad.com) shows a rotating series of at least 6 images of agents, half of which are women, and only one of which is a white male. Other pages on both the U.K. and U.S. sites show women in the same uniform as the men, except that, as in formal military dress, the pants are replaced by a simple skirt.

Regardless of who wears the uniform, these elements of dress, and the stereotype to which they allude, derive from and continue to convey a male identity. Few men choose short-sleeved white dress shirts with black ties as their preferred style of dress, but historically these are unquestionably men's clothing. For current American audiences they especially evoke mid-century white-collar workers, including the first computer programmers. Even the statement about women agents acknowledges the expectation that Geek Squad agents are male. Other language on the site sometimes also slips into this assumption. A description of Geek Squad's history on the U.K. site lists 1997 as the year when the uniform was introduced and describes this as "proving that when women say they love a man in uniform, they don't mean just any old uniform." In this quote, the wearer of the uniform is male, and the subject of (heterosexual) female attention.

While the static images thus present a diverse crew, the more in-depth views of the agents provided through the video spots counter this presentation. All of the videos and television spots

available on the Geek Squad site feature male agents, most of them white. Some of the television spots presented on the site also present stereotypical views of white male computer experts versus black and female users. In a video entitled "Ravenous CD Drive," Robert, identified as "the 'Chief Inspector' at the Geek Squad" tells a story about a "lady who came in" to complain that her computer was eating her CDs. Highlighting her likely idiocy, Robert laughs and says "okay, we've got a live one here!" The video then shows five white guys in Geek Squad attire clustered around a computer and demonstrating that the woman had been shoving CDs in between the CD drive and the frame of the computer, resulting in a large pile of damaged CDs jammed in the computer. This closely resembles an oft-circulated computer help desk joke in which a clueless user mistakes the CD-ROM drive for a cupholder.[4]

In another television spot, Robert declares that many rock stars are Geek Squad clients. "You'd think a rapper wouldn't be a big computer geek," he says and then claims, pointing to a picture of the rapper on the wall, that Ice Cube is a "total nerd" who "loves Excel." Whether Ice Cube is actually a Geek Squad client or actually loves Excel, the statements are played for irony, reinforcing the idea that a black musician would **not** be the kind of person who "loves Excel" or who calls the Geek Squad in to fix his spreadsheet problem.

Through these many contradictory references, Geek Squad attempts to retain the beneficial aspects of the nerd stereotype while disavowing the negative aspects. Geek Squad wants to claim diversity among its agents, but has trouble maintaining that claim when it provides a more detailed view of its workforce. It seeks to allay the unmasculine aspects of nerd identity by combining the nerd image with references to law enforcement. It goes to great lengths to present its workforce as nerdy but sympathetic, although as some of the TV spots demonstrate, this presentation also sometimes slips. These slips and contradictions demonstrate the strength of the nerd stereotype,

and especially of its persistent negativity. They also demonstrate the difficulty in expanding the nerd identity to include people who are not white or not male.

In seeking to counter the negative connotations of nerd identity, Geek Squad's presentations also demonstrate the fears associated with computer use. In the *Wizard of Oz*, Glinda's first and crucial question to Dorothy is "are you a good witch or a bad witch?" This question applies also to nerds. The bad nerd – asocial, bitter, too smart for his own good – might cause harm. The good nerd – lacking in social skills but still friendly, willing to use his intelligence to help others – just needs a little "dating advice." This distinction might reflect concerns about computers as well. While recognizing the advantages of computers in multiple contexts, people still fear the potential harm they can do.

"White and Nerdy"

> I'd like to roll with the gangstas
>
> Although it's apparent I'm too white and nerdy
>
> "White and Nerdy," by Weird Al Yankovic

In 2006, well-known song parodist Weird Al Yankovic released a video of his song "White and Nerdy" from the album "Straight Outta Lynwood."[5] The song parodies rapper Chamillionaire's hit song, "Ridin' Dirty," whose title and lyrics refer to conflict between young black men and the police, and to the hope the police have of catching the singer "ridin' dirty," i.e. with illegal drugs or weapons in the car. With over 7.4 million views, Yankovic's "White and Nerdy" video ranked as the 19th most-viewed video on YouTube as of March 6, 2007. The song is Yankovic's first single to hit Billboard's top ten, an event referred to on several online sites and in news articles as a nerd "revenge," and credited in large part to the release of the video and other material on the Internet. (Billboard; Cheng) Tying his own identity to that of his nerdy character

in the song and video, Yankovic commented that "This is a song I was born to write. I've been doing research my entire life." (Vrabel) In a "behind the scenes" video about the making of "White and Nerdy," Yankovic says he felt he should make the video because he is a "white and nerdy icon."

"White and Nerdy" provides a thorough exposition of the nerd stereotype, supplying important clues to the meaning and persistence of that stereotype. Several aspects of the video, including its title, its parody of the hip hop genre, as well as numerous images within the video, connect nerd identity to whiteness and specifically contrast this to a particular view of black identity. This helps illuminate not only the continued salience of the nerd stereotype, but also its continued gatekeeper function with regard to computer expertise.

Yankovic's song parodies always make several references to the original song, often through use of words and phrases that rhyme with the words in the original. Similarly, his "White and Nerdy" video makes visual references to the original Chamillionaire "Ridin' Dirty" video. As in many music videos, both videos intersperse narrative sequences with more static shots of the singer on a set singing directly to the camera. Yankovic drops most references to the narrative shots in "Ridin' Dirty," which involve boxing and encounters with police, and replaces these with narrative sequences that tell the story of nerd identity. However, he directly imitates the look of Chamillionaire's static shots. There are two such scenes, which appear multiple times in the video. In one, Chamillionaire appears solo in close-up in front of a large chameleon symbol constructed of burning hazard flares. In the other, a medium shot, Chamillionaire and f Krayzie Bone dance in front of a screen displaying a Chamillionaire logo.

In Yankovic's version, his clothes in each of these shots are nearly identical to Chamillionaire's, parodying the hip hop look rather than the nerd stereotype. However, as he

points out in lyrics sung during one of the close-up shots, "ain't got no grills, but I still wear braces." The background symbols in these shots are also altered to refer to nerds. Instead of a chameleon, the burning symbol behind Yankovic in the close-up shots is PacMan. In the medium shot, he dances in front of a version of the Schrödinger equation. (This equation, used in quantum physics, also appears in the well-known 500-question Nerdity Test online.[6]) In one of the funniest guest appearances in the video, his dancing partner in these shots is Donny Osmond, who, unlike Yankovic is not dressed in hip hop style (as is f Krayzie Bone, who appears in these sequences in the original "Ridin' Dirty" video), but in Osmond's usual game-show-host shirt and jacket.

The narrative sequences in "White and Nerdy" include several standard touchstones of nerd identity, particularly emphasizing computer skills and media fandom. Yankovic's nerd character is "fluent in Javascript as well as Klingon." He also knows Pascal (a rather obscure computer language, usually used to teach programming in college classes) and is shown using his computer in the shower. He helps his friends with HTML for their webpages (and "even made a homepage for my dog"). He has a MySpace page, where his "top eight spaces" for friends include famous real and fictional nerds like Bill Gates and Napoleon Dynamite, along with nerd-connected interests such as the cartoon character Mr. Peabody and Albert Einstein.

The video also includes several popular culture references associated with nerds, such as comic books, science fiction action figures, and Monty Python. Yankovic also connects to modern images of nerds and to video culture by including a scene in which he imitates the infamous "Star Wars Kid" video, in which a young Canadian boy taped himself miming a light saber battle and was subjected to unwanted fame and online ridicule.

Many of the specific references in "White and Nerdy" are relatively obscure and would primarily be known only to people within particular fan cultures or with specialized knowledge

(such as the Schrödinger equation). For instance, in one scene, Yankovic conducts a back-alley "drug buy" from a young black man in which the purchase turns out to be a hand-illustrated package containing a video of the "Star Wars Holiday Special." This made-for-television movie, which aired once only in 1978 is discussed by fans on several online forums.[7] Taped copies are extremely difficult to come by and illegal to distribute. Any such video would be a bootlegged copy. The "illicit buy" and the hand-done art in Yankovic's version demonstrates knowledge of this.

"White and Nerdy" thus establishes its nerd bona fides. However, much of the video drops the "Nerdy" in favor of emphasizing the "White." Yankovic's hair is worth noting in this regard. His own very curly hair was apparently not "white" enough, so the video shows him with a very straight blunt bowl cut. The opening shot in which "you see me mowing my front lawn" shows Yankovic pushing a lawnmower in front of a suburban home. This domestic scene parodies bland white suburbia, but makes very little connection to standard nerd iconography, which does not include lawn mowers. Indeed such outdoor activities are anathema to the standard stereotypical nerd.

During the line "Stephen Hawking in my library," Yankovic appears in a well-appointed, dimly-lit library with leather-bound books and a globe. Although the hair and glasses maintain continuity with other shots of Yankovic as a nerd, in this scene the more pertinent allusion is to the British upper class, as characterized by the actor Alistair Cooke, who introduced episodes of *Masterpiece Theater* in a similar setting. Similarly, the line "whiter than sour cream" shows Yankovic, in polo shirt with a sweater tied around his neck, playing badminton with three other white people. Reminiscent of tennis scenes in movies about Britain in the early 20th century, this scene, like the library shot, lays claim to the nerd's white history by referencing the white British

upper class.

"White and Nerdy" also highlights the nerd's whiteness by directly contrasting it with the stereotypical black identity of the gangsta rapper. Black men appear as gangstas throughout the video. The line "keep your 40, I'll just have an Earl Grey tea" shows Yankovic (all in white with a sweater vest) sipping tea from a china cup. Next to him sits a black man with a can (presumably 40 ounces of malt liquor) in a bag. He wears a rolled blue bandana across his forehead, sunglasses, a large chain, and a white tank shirt.

In her article about identity in high school, Mary Bucholtz explores the meaning of nerd identity. (Bucholtz) Like Eglash, she points out the connection between African American culture and "coolness," with the result that most white kids in high school adopt some aspects of black slang and interest in African American music. By contrast, nerds disavow such connections through avoidance of slang, use of superstandard English, and performance of intellectual ability. Although nerdy high school students do not express their identity in racial terms, Bucholtz demonstrates how, within the context of a diverse high school population, the nerd becomes a hyperwhite identity. Yankovic's nerd, "whiter than sour cream," similarly represents a hyperwhite identity, of the sort many white people wish to disavow. Whites frequently refer to bland white foodstuffs to invoke the lack of (nutritional) content in the white identity, often in the context of disavowing that identity in favor of a more "flavorful" ethnic background.

Yankovic is able to jokingly exaggerate white identity specifically through invoking the hyperwhite identity of the nerd and contrasting that identity to the black identity deemed most frightening by whites: the young black "gangsta" male of hip hop culture. (See Rose for discussions of white cultural reactions to black rap fans.) Yankovic specifically references this fear in the opening shots of the video. When two black men in a cool car are approached by

Yankovic's nerd, they panic and quickly attempt to lock their doors. The fact that they are sitting in a convertible, and thus equally accessible with doors locked or unlocked adds further punch to the joke. This mimes, in joking reversal, the well-known reaction of many white people to driving through black neighborhoods. It also leaves intact the "real" fear of black men by substituting a joke fear of the white nerd.

Chamillionaire's "Ridin' Dirty" stands in a long line of rap songs that outline the tension between the police and the black community, especially young black males. Although it provides contradictory information about whether or not the singer and friends engage in illegal activities, the video protests racial profiling. The lyrics echo previous songs such as Ice Cube's "The Nigga You Love to Hate," in which Ice Cube raps "they'd rather find us with guns and white powder." (Rose 136) Because "White and Nerdy" drops this context, but retains the images of "gangsta" black men, Yankovic's video takes for granted the view that such men are dangerous. The representation of the nerd in "White and Nerdy" – asexual, intellectual, wimpy, uncool – gets much of its humor through its juxtaposition with the polar opposite of the stereotypical black male – hypersexual, physical, aggressive, cool. In his "Behind the Scenes" video about filming "White and Nerdy," Yankovic refers to the opening scene as "gangstas in suburbia." In the white imagination, suburbia is white, and the gangstas are now the ones out of place. A slow cruise through a predominantly white neighborhood would in fact likely be dangerous for two young black men, but the scene exaggerates their fear of Yankovic's ineffectual nerd and thus downplays white people's relative power.

While race is the most pertinent identity characteristic to "White and Nerdy," it is worth noting that there are almost no women in the video. Three appear in the background (two playing badminton, and one in a Renaissance Fair scene). The only featured female character appears to be

Yankovic's nerd's mother (played by comedian Judy Tenuta), who shows resigned puzzlement when her son gives her a present of a surge protector. When Yankovic tips his wine glass during a romantic dinner, it is toward a large roll of bubblewrap, with which he "hope[s] no one sees me get freaky."[8] All of Yankovic's fellow nerds – playing D&D and trivia games, bowling, etc. – are young white men. Most of the other characters are young black men. As in previous fictional depictions of nerds, such as the *Revenge of the Nerds* movies, nerds are male, and the negotiation of nerd identity concerns the nerd's masculinity.

Nerdcore Rising

> Oh and wouldn't all of those tough rappers hate it
> if the nerdcore rose up and got elevated?
>
> "Nerdcore Rising," by MC Frontalot

The term nerdcore hip hop dates from 2000 and is attributed to songwriter Damien Hess, who raps and performs under the name MC Frontalot. It connotes a style of hip hop performed by self-identified nerds, whose lyrics often reference interests and activities associated with the nerd stereotype, such as computers and Star Wars. In the last couple of years, the genre has begun to receive attention in niche and mainstream media, with stories in, among others, *The Guardian*, *Wired* and on the "Day to Day" program on NPR radio. At least two documentaries about the phenomenon are currently in the works.[9]

Both commentators and artists describe nerdcore as a genre, not a parody, of hiphop. (Braiker; Monzy) However, the interest it has generated clearly stems from it's "difference" from other hip hop. Weird Al Yankovic, interviewed for the documentary *Nerdcore Rising*, states "It's ostensibly the ironic juxtaposition of two very disparate cultures." In this depiction, hip hop is a black culture, and nerds are white. The film treatment section on the "Nerdcore for Life" website

also explains the differences between nerdcore and other forms of hip hop:

> [G]enerally most songs focus on interests that in the past, mainstream America would consider geeky such as video games, sci-fi conventions, computer programming, cult films, robots, the internet, anime and science and technology. ...Geeksta rappers expound on these subjects for the same reason that Gangsta rappers talk about poverty, violence, wealth and power….it is the lifestyle that they know and are proud of.

This description takes the "gangsta" pose of mainstream hiphop at face value, accepting a stereotypical depiction of black men as being proud of a lifestyle that includes "poverty, violence, wealth and power."

Nerdcore performances and self-presentation highlight the juxtaposition of hip hop, as an expression of black coolness, with nerdiness, the white antithesis of coolness. In an interview on www.hipsterplease.com, MC Frontalot says that "there are certainly a lot of people who have latched onto the idea that you don't have to be cool to write down raps and even share them with people." Featured in the trailer for the documentary *Nerdcore Rising*, he says "nerdcore hip hop is like regular hip hop except that instead of being all freaked out about how cool you are, you just dork it out completely."

Lyrics from nerdcore songs also highlight the antihip stance of nerdcore rappers. In "Nerdcore Rising," MC Frontalot raps:

> the slipshod rap stylings of the hip kids continue to vex
> they get sex, money, power, but their jams are like flecks
> of sea foam against the great reef of my boredom.

This critiques mainstream rap as boring, and implies that mainstream rappers are posers.

Nerdcore rappers' representation of themselves also includes negative aspects, and specifically highlights their nerdiness and undesirability. "[W]e tape on our spectacles; we compile the assembler," raps Jesse Dangerously in the song "Nerdcore Rising". In "Nerdcore Hiphop," MC Frontalot raps:

> nerd core hip hop other rappers run in fear
> that I'll put them on the record where their friends could hear
> they'd get sneered at, listed: not to be trusted
> seen hob-nobbin with the frontalot, busted
> "that kid's a dork, he rhyme every day
> on the karaoke rappin yo he ain't got anything to say
> ain't got no record deal, never will
> such a spaz better get his ass some kind of a sedative"

These and other nerdcore lyrics label nerdcore artists as geeks, spazzes, dorks, and "nebbishes" (a term used in in MC Frontalot's song "Penny Arcade Theme"). All of these terms emphasize a lack of social skills, and position nerdcore artists as outside of hegemonic masculinity. (Connell; Kendall)

Nerdcore artists thus position mainstream black rappers as the people with power and themselves as oppressed. A trailer for the documentary *Nerdcore for Life* begins with the nerdcore rapper Monzy explaining:

> Ladies and gentlemen, it's hard out there for a pimp. But it's even harder out there for a nerd. Us nerds are the oppressed and the downtrodden. ... In the 20s we had women's lib, in the 60s it was civil rights, in the 90s gay pride, and in the new millennium, bitches better fear the Nerd Revolution!

This suggests that the mostly white[10], mostly male nerdcore artists are the ones without power, now that everyone else has "gotten theirs." Monzy's hyperbolic declaration is of course meant to be humorous, but it also reveals underlying assumptions about oppression and power. Although his statement positions nerds as similar to other oppressed groups, it demonstrates a lack of sympathy with members of those groups, through for instance, opposing the nerd's struggle to that of a "pimp," and through the use of the term "women's lib" rather than feminism.

Most nerdcore artists are white, and some explicitly highlight that fact. For instance, Bryce

Case, Jr. raps under the name YT Cracker. Cracker's name plays off of two derogatory slang terms for white people: "whitey" and "cracker." This emphasizes his white identity, as well as declaring his status as a hacker. In 1999, he received a fine and probation for hacking a government website. He also used the handle ytcracker for his hacker activities. (Braiker; Kahney) As a hacker, Case would have been presumed white anyway, thus his hacking use of the handle makes a joke of the double meaning of "cracker." As a rapper, that same handle takes on a double irony, as it now marks his identity as outside of the presumed black identity of a mainstream rapper.

There are few women rappers in nerdcore. In addition, as in more mainstream forms of rock music, nerdcore lyrics generally represent women as objects of desire. In keeping with the nerd pose, most lyrics present this desire as unrequited, as in MC Frontalot's lyric from "Goth Girls": "at the show, you can see the black lace on parade; I met a hundred dozen of 'em but I ain't got laid." Nerdcore rappers thus contrast themselves to the self-representation of mainstream black rappers, whose lyrics often include stories about sex with women and whose videos include sexualized images of women. Nerds are the nice guys who never get laid, or are vulnerable to women who take advantage of them (as in MC Frontalot's song "Yellow Lasers").

The nerd teenagers Bucholtz studied rejected rap, slang, and anything associated with African American culture. Nerdcore artists have embraced rap, but their performance is oppositional to mainstream rap. Nerdcore lyrics and descriptions express suspicion towards black rappers and assert a distinctly different white identity, one that specifically incorporates intellectual pursuits, especially those connected to computers.

Monzy wonders "whether nerdcore is a parody of hip-hop or an homage." It contains elements of both, and maintains that contradiction through its ironic stance. In a study of the

conversational interaction of adolescent boys, Korobov notes that "ironic positioning strategies have a built-in deniability to them" and thus "are useful for deflecting accusations of prejudice or bias while still getting a potentially shallow, sexist, or homophobic message across." (242) Similar to the strategies Korobov observed of boys talking about girls they know, nerdcore rappers dis the "pimps" and "gangstas" of mainstream rap, but use ironic self-deprecation to avoid the appearance of racism.

Conclusion

The image of the nerd persists in our culture because of the richness of references, and the plethora of narratives to which it connects. Embodied in the nerd are stories about economics, technology, gender, and race. All of these topics continue to be sites of power, inequalities, contestation, and controversy. The nerd stereotype favors particular narratives about these topics. Thus, its continued existence perpetuates particular interpretations of these issues.

The nerd stereotype conjoins five statements: (1) Computers are an important but problematic type of technology. (2) Nerds understand and enjoy computers. (3) Those who understand and enjoy computers are nerds. (4) Nerds are socially inept and undesirable. (5) Nerds are white men. Taken as a whole, these statements imply two important things with regard to race, gender, and technology. First, the masculinity of nerds is still somewhat in question, protecting a form of hegemonic masculinity which continues to give primacy to aggressiveness and physicality. Second, women and men of color are excluded entirely from this category, protecting the superior economic and technological status of white men.

This leads, among other things, to the "computational reticence" Sherry Turkle identifies among young women seeking to learn computer programming. (Turkle) When knowledge of computers is connected to a particular identity, and to a specific set of values, including

nonsensuality and avoidance of intimacy (Turkle 223), many people will avoid greater knowledge of computers out of distaste for the culture surrounding them, rather than necessarily distaste for the computer itself. Thus Eglash refers to the nerd as a "gatekeeper" to science and technology expertise.

While the nerd stereotype is not the only gatekeeper, the image of the nerd is part of an overall culture among computer scientists. As the systems analyst and author Ellen Ullman has noted, people seeking to hire computer programmers often look for signs of nerdiness as proof of intelligence and programming ability. Numerous studies have pointed to the damage these kinds of expectations do to women seeking to enter this profession. (Margolis and Fisher; Ullman; Woodfield)

After several years of gains for women and minorities in computing education and occupations, those gains seem to be reversing, especially for women. For instance, the percentage of bachelor's degrees in computer science awarded to women peaked in 1985-86 at 36%, and by 2003-2004 had fallen to 25%. (NCES) The percentages of bachelor's degrees in computer science awarded to Blacks and Hispanics have gone up and down from year to year, and seem to have made some upward progress in the early 2000s, with peaks in 1991 of 13% and 9% respectively, and low points in 1993 of 8% and 3%, respectively. (NSF 1993-1994) In the most recent statistics available (from 2004), Blacks and Hispanics accounted for 12% and 7%, respectively, of computer science bachelor's degrees awarded in 2004. (NSF 2006a.) While an improvement, this remains disproportionate to their percentage of the population. In projected 2004 population statistics, Blacks and Hispanics constitute 14% and 16% of the population of people aged 18-24 in the U.S. (NSF 2006a) Blacks and Hispanics are represented even less proportionately among those employed as "computer and information scientists," at 5% and 4%, respectively. (NSF 2006b)[11]

For minorities, academic success in computer science does not seem to translate to computer programming jobs.

Overall drops in interest in computer science appear to hit women and minorities harder than white men. For instance, total degrees in computer science awarded dropped from 24,500 in 1991 to 18,700 in 1993, but the proportion of men went from 61% to 76%. Blacks dropped from 13% to 8% and Hispanics dropped from 9% to 3%. This seems to indicate that during increases of negative attitudes towards computer occupations, the effects are stronger for women and minorities than for white men. While Blacks have come close at a couple of points to achieving proportionality in their receipt of computer science degrees, they appear not to be able to translate that into occupational success in computer science, perhaps indicating lingering beliefs that computer scientists (nerds) are not Black. The statistics concerning participation in computer education and employment point to uneven progress at best, and regress at worse, for women and minorities.

In addition to constituting a barrier to more diverse participation in computer science, nerd myths express concerns about information technology and its affect on our lives. The computer figures large in the economic anxieties of the day, and most economic activity relies on computers to some degree. We worry about the computer skills of children and young people, lest they be left behind in the digital workplace. Meanwhile, both computer failure and success can be problematic, potentially leading to loss of data or income (in the case of computer failure) or loss of privacy or control (in the case of computer success). Issues concerning computer crime, privacy concerns, and surveillance receive the most press attention, but jokes concerning computer errors and over-reliance on computers by organizations have a long history.

The figure of the nerd may help keep these fears at bay. Computers are the nerd's

department, and while he benefits from his control of them he also pays a high price for his close association. Representing nerds as lacking social and sartorial skills, obsessed with trivia, and interested in fringe cultural activities, allays fears of the nerd's power, and by extension, the power of the computer. Imagine, by contrast, if our stereotype of a hyper-intelligent computer programmer was that of a physically powerful, charismatic, and virile leader. The combination of the standard aggressiveness of hegemonic masculinity with the intellect of the nerd would produce a frightening figure, and require a very different attitude towards computers.

The nerd allows us to say "don't bother me with that." We can use our word processors and iPods, our computerized cars and refrigerators, and if something goes wrong, call in the Geek Squad. Meanwhile, we need not concern ourselves with the oddly animate, hyper-literal "mind" of the machine. Picturing the nerd as defective in particular ways also allows us to feel superior to those who actually care about how computers work, even when we ourselves lack that understanding.

In an age in which more and more jobs require computer knowledge, the nerd provides a foil. We do what we must, but there is always someone nerdier, someone "closer to the machine" (Ullman). If our economic status seems precariously tied to computers, with others better able to benefit from them, we can console ourselves with the knowledge that at least we're not a nerd. Or perhaps even with the belief that, because we're not nerds, that's just not something we can (or want to) do anyway.

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Endnotes

1. See reports from NCES and NSF listed in Works Cited.

2. A database search of U.S. newspaper articles revealed that use of the word nerd in newspaper headlines has increased steadily since 1983, with the exception of a brief dip in 2001 (possibly caused by changes in news coverage following 9/11).

3. As others have noted (Eglash 2002, Kendall 1999), the terms nerd and geek can be used more or less interchangeably, although geek tends to have a more positive valance.

4. This and similar jokes can be found at www.funny2.com/computer.htm, www.workjoke.com/projoke29.htm, and www.eastland.net/tech/tech_humor.htm.

5. This video can be viewed several places online, including Yankovic's Myspace page: http://www.myspace.com/weirdal.

6. See http://www.armory.com/tests/nerd500.html.

7. See www.starwarsholidayspecial.com.

8. The bubble wrap sequence appears to have been inspired by a bit of onomatopoeia in Chamillionaire's "Ridin'" video, in which the lyrics "pop pop" refer to gunfire. Bubble wrap otherwise has no particular connection to nerds, although the intimation that Yankovic's nerd is incapable of having sex with humans fits the anti-social aspect of the nerd stereotype.

9. Trailers for the documentaries can be found on YouTube.com and on the websites for the documentaries. *Nerdcore Rising*'s website is at http://www.nerdcorerisingthemovie.com. *Nerdcore for Life*'s website is at http://www.nerdcoreforlife.com.

00. Monzy identifies himself (and his fellow nerdcore rapper MC Plus+) as "Persian" (Monzy 2006).

11. This compares degrees awarded to population parameters only for young people, but compares employment statistics to population parameters among all ages. According to U.S. Census data from 2005, Blacks constitute 12.8% of the U.S. population, and Hispanics constitute14.4 %. (See http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html, accessed March 19, 2007.)